

## The Reality of Reincarnation and The Traditional Yoruba Response based on *Odù Ifá*

AKIN-OTIKO, Akinmayowa  
Institute of African and Diaspora Studies (IADS)  
University of Lagos [pakin-otiko@unilag.edu.ng](mailto:pakin-otiko@unilag.edu.ng)

### Abstract

‘Reincarnation’ is a concept and belief system that has attracted the attention of many thinkers across different intellectual disciplines because it is found in many cultures across the world. The discourses have taken various dimensions and different attempts have been made to explain the place of reincarnation in the cycle of life. Some have identified reincarnation with partial rebirth of some spiritual parts of humans into a body; others have referred to reincarnation as the transmigration and metempsychosis of souls. These different views still have not resolved salient questions about: i) the true nature of reincarnation, ii) how many times the soul can be embodied and iii) the idea of predestination, etc. This paper discusses reincarnation within the belief system of the Yoruba, using *Odù Ifá* as a reference point for the ideas of the people in order to show the basic principles responsible for the belief, as well as to clearly indicate the nature of the belief and how this belief differs from the views in some other religions. To achieve the aim of this paper, interviews with *Babaláwo* (custodians of the *Ifá* Corpus) were conducted and a review of existing literature on reincarnation was done. Different scholars and philosophers have either denied the reality of reincarnation or improperly discussed reincarnation among Africans because of the influence of religions from the Arabia. Findings clearly show that there are two basic understandings of reincarnation among the Yoruba as contained in *Ifá* Corpus; first, there is a clear understanding of a total return of a person - body and soul - into the world, to complete a chosen destiny; and the other is a

partial return of a person which is expressed in a desire for an ancestor to return in a bodily form and live in the family.

Keywords: *Ara àti èmí*, *Odù-Ifá*, Reincarnation, Yoruba, Religion

## Introduction

Reincarnation, as a concept, is derived from a Latin word, *reincarnationem*, which literally means entering the flesh again. This is different from the doctrine of immortality of the soul, which states that “the identity, the consciousness or the memory of the individual persists after death”.<sup>1</sup> The origin of the thought on reincarnation is not known, but different religions and cultures have different understandings and use of reincarnation as a concept.<sup>2</sup> The Greek pre-Socratics had ideas about reincarnation, and it is also contained in the teachings of Pythagoras.

As a concept, reincarnation is the philosophical or religious position that an aspect of a living being (particularly humans) starts a new life in a different physical body or form after each biological death. It is also called rebirth or transmigration. Geach interpreted reincarnation as “consisting in one and the same human mind successively animating two different human bodies.”<sup>3</sup> Reincarnation is a central tenet of all major Indian religions, namely Jainism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism.<sup>4</sup> The idea of reincarnation is found in many ancient cultures, and a belief in rebirth/metempsychosis was held by Greek historic figures, such as Pythagoras, Socrates, and Plato.<sup>5</sup> It is also a common belief of various ancient and modern religions; it is found as well in many nonEuropean societies around the world, in places such as Australia, East Asia, Siberia, and South America.<sup>6</sup>

Reincarnation has been understood as a real experience just as it has been symbolically understood and used among Jews when discussing the practice of conversion to Judaism. According to a school of thought in Judaism, when non-Jews are drawn to Judaism, it is because they had been Jews in a former life. Such souls may wander among nations through multiple lives, until they find their way back to Judaism, including through

finding themselves born in a gentile family with a lost Jewish ancestor.<sup>7</sup> “The doctrine of reincarnation, accepted by some ancient religions, is denied by most of the great modern religions, except in some eastern areas, mainly because of the influence of Christianity, which states that it is philosophically unacceptable: the human souls are unique, each united substantially, to its “body” and of an immortal nature.”<sup>8</sup> In India, reincarnation is openly discussed and believed in, the same applies to China and Japan, the Taoist and Zen masters teach reincarnation and outside the sphere of religion, philosophers of the West like Plato and Pythagoras, the church fathers Origen and Clemens Alexandrinus and, in more recent times, Goethe, Leibniz, and Schopenhauer reflected on reincarnation.<sup>9</sup> These different scholars came up with different perspectives in discussing reincarnation.

Africans are not left out of the discussion, as reincarnation is an essential tenet of many traditional African religious systems and philosophies. Belief in rebirth is known amongst Akan (Ghana), Yoruba (Nigeria), Shona (Zimbabwe), Nupe (Nigeria), and many others.<sup>10</sup> These views have, however, been presented under two dominant positions; first, that there is only partial reincarnation in the African culture and, second, that there is no reincarnation at all in African thought. Yoruba people are not alone in the belief in reincarnation but they are different in the understanding of reincarnation. One can clearly state that no religion, philosophy or science has successfully proven beyond doubt that reincarnation does not exist, although there are sanctions for believing it in some religions.

The thesis of partial reincarnation is the idea that a baby identified as the reincarnation of a dead family member might possess certain traceable features of the latter but not the soul of the latter. The main reason for the development of the thesis is that the complete reincarnation of a dead person is inconsistent with the beliefs of some African

societies as it conflicts with the continued existence of the dead person in the spiritual land of the dead. It is suggested, consequently, that only some features,<sup>11</sup> dominant characteristics<sup>12</sup> or afflatus<sup>13</sup> of the spirit of the dead find their way into the baby, hence partial reincarnation.<sup>14</sup>

Whereas, Onyewuenyi advanced that there cannot be a concept of reincarnation in African thought because, unlike the original sense of the doctrine, it cannot be maintained in the African context that the soul of a dead person informs another body for another span of earthly life.<sup>15</sup> For him, the complete inhabitation of a new body at death is all that the Latin origin of the word ‘reincarnation’ entails, namely ‘re’ (again), and ‘incarnate’ (to enter into the body).<sup>16</sup> This led him to come up with a radical position that any human soul after death would either inhabit a new body (completely) or it would not at all.

Apart from these two major views among Africans, some scholars and philosophers have disregarded reincarnation as lacking logic and as being extraneous to genetics.<sup>17</sup> In his book, *Reincarnation?* Egbe argued that the belief in reincarnation among Africans holds no ground. In his logical positivist criticism of reincarnation, he held that the laws of physics and genetics adequately refute the belief of Africans in reincarnation because, as he said reincarnation, is a manipulation of the evil spirits.<sup>18</sup>

In the case of the Yoruba religion, belief in reincarnation has been perceived and discussed by non-Africans as a strange phenomenon that belongs to the Stone Age, and the treatment it has received fits the treatment that attended the whole issue of the religions of the Africans in the early 70s. But it has also been noted that “the Yoruba... have eschatological ideas similar to Abrahamic religions, but in most African societies, there is

a marked absence of such clear-cut notions of heaven and hell, although there are notions of God judging the soul after death.”<sup>19</sup>

This essay examines the concept of reincarnation as a system of belief among the Yoruba people, based on the teachings of *Ifá* Corpus. This is done as a religio-cultural examination of the concept of reincarnation and attempts was made to clarify the real belief in reincarnation, as well as provide basic principles from the *Ifá* Corpus that are responsible for the belief in reincarnation among the Yoruba. Literatures were reviewed and five *Babaláwo* (Yoruba diviners and religious leaders), were interviewed to get the content of *Ifá* Corpus since they are custodians of the Corpus.

### **Reality of Reincarnation in *Ifá* Corpus**

In both the Yoruba religion (*Ifá* Corpus) and cultural (experiential) worldview, the belief in reincarnation is different from the doctrine of the immortality of the soul; that is, life after death, whereby the soul lives on, either happily or sadly. The concept of reincarnation for the Yoruba is deep and clear, the *Ifá* Corpus being the scriptural repository of the religion presents two ways in which reincarnation is possible; what can then be described as a strict sense and a loose sense. In *Odu Osé Ìdí* (a verse in *Ifá* Corpus titled *Osé Ìdí*, where there is a rendition titled *A dífá fún àbíkú ayé* (a divination made for a child that is born to die).

1) *Òsá funfun l'ókè, sáí, sàì, sáí*

*Hailing Òsá who is white*

2) *Ad'ifá fuín Ò rúnmilà tìn fín gbogbo omo sòwò àbíkú...*

*A divination was made for Ò rúnmilà when he was having children that died after birth...*

This verse described the strict sense of reincarnation. *Ifá* Corpus narrated the experience of Ò rúnmilà (divinity responsible for *Ifá* divination). He kept having children that will die

and return to be born into the family several times. This implied a return of the person (body - *ara* and soul - *èmí*) into the world, after death in the form of a new child. It is not just a simplistic return of the spiritual aspect of the human, it is a complete return of an individual, in the old body, to continue his life on earth. This verse is believed to accounts for the instances of repeated body marks found on *Emèrè/àbíké* (a child that is born to die). The appearance of body marks that a deceased persons had, on the body of newly born babies is one strong basis for belief in reincarnation, as contained in the *Ifá* Corpus. There is also the strong semblance found between *àkúdàáyá* (one who died and is later found living in another location) and a buried person, which is referred to and known by all the *Babaláwo* interviewed, more than the content of the *Ifá* Corpus itself. This is supposed to evidence experiential narratives, which abound about people that were found living in a different location after they were supposedly dead and burial in their original domicile.

On the other hand, another *Odu Ifá* titled *Ìka 'Gúndá* contains the loose sense of reincarnation. The content of this *Ìka 'Gúndá* refers to reincarnation as a process of partial rebirth. This occurs when an ancestor in one or several individuals, strictly within the same family makes reappearance in the various characteristics or features of one or more children. The reappearance is confirmed through names such as *Babátúndé* (father returns), *Yétúndé* (mother returns), *Babátúnjì* (father wakes once again).

The teachings about reincarnation in the religio-cultural space of the Yoruba, does not replace the teaching about the end of life. For the Yoruba, there is a clear teaching about the end of life, *ìmò rẹ̀rẹ̀* (a place of bliss), which is the normal end to the cycle of birth, life on earth, death and life after death. The teaching on the end of life is reflected in a part of the creed of the Yoruba religion, which states that: "I believe in heaven, an eternal place of

reward for good deeds, and in hell a place of punishment for evil deeds. (*mo ni ìgbàgbó nínú ìmò-rèrè, ibi èrè ayérayé fún ìwà rere, àti ibi ayérayé, fún ìwà ibi*).”<sup>20</sup>

The Yoruba, however, have another apparently conflicting doctrine on what happens after death. For them, “once they (the dead) have entered in after-life, there they remain in that state, and there, the survivors and their children after them can keep unbroken intercourse with them, especially if they have been good persons while on earth and were ripe for death when they died.”<sup>21</sup> Given this belief, one may then say “it is almost certain that there is no belief in reincarnation in the classical sense among the Yoruba.”<sup>22</sup> By classical sense, it is meant “the passage of the soul from one body to another.”<sup>23</sup> Yoruba do not teach this as a normal stage in the cycle of existence; but when situated within the context of earlier point, it may be argued that there is no real contradiction, as such transfer of soul does not preclude inheritance of traits of deceased ancestors.

### **Justification for the belief in Reincarnation**

For the Yoruba, as we observed earlier from *Ifá Corpus*, reincarnation is the occasional return of some persons (body - *ara* and soul - *èmi*) to the world after their death on earth. It is not a general teaching that every dead person must reincarnate. The belief is based on four basic principles.

The first basic principle is based on the lived experience of the people. According to *Babaláwo* Awogbile, “there are numerous communal as well as individual experiences or encounters with individuals who died and were later found living in another community.”<sup>24</sup> According to *Ifá*, these people occupy the same body they had in their first



life. They are able to live as visitors in the new community because no one knew them during their first life; and so, they are not regarded as dead. Since they occupy the old body, people who knew them before their death, easily recognise them as the ‘so and so’ who had died. And, because they occupy the old body, experience and *Ifá* hold that the reincarnated persons got married, had jobs and children, interacted with humans normally and only disappeared after someone who knew them in their first life recognised them.

This principle does not answer the question whether they would they have lived to a ripe old age and then die normally if no one recognised them or, would they just disappear after achieving their purposes on earth? These questions cannot be properly answered, as their second life is usually lived among people who never knew them in the first life, making it impossible to gather testimonies about those that lived without being recognised in their new community. This principle also does not answer the question of what happens to the buried body? There are no answers to this question, because it has never been verified if the dead assumed the same body or another one. Yoruba ordinarily do not exhumate bodies after burial unless there is a serious reason for that; it is usually assumed that the dead is to be left to rest.

Since the reincarnation takes place in a far away land, there would never have been a reason to check if the body of the reincarnated person was available in the grave while he/she was reincarnated in a far off community or not. And, in the cases of those who were recognised and who then disappeared, it is again impossible to affirm whether they assumed the old body or not because, no one can account for where the body went to after recognition: did it return to where it was buried or to another place for it to continue its existence? These questions remain unanswered, but they do not dismiss the belief in

reincarnation as the return of the body - *ara* and soul – *èmí* for a second round of living in the physical world.

The second basic principle is that it is believed that individuals choose their destinies before being born on earth. According to *Babaláwo* Ojekunle “it is expected that every human person will choose a destiny from heaven, and once born on earth, one is to live out one’s destiny to the full.”<sup>25</sup> In the Yoruba religion, as well as culture, the human body is moulded in heaven and thereafter given birth to on earth. “The individual *orí* (personality nature) chooses what an individual will become on earth.”<sup>26</sup> The *orí* keeps watch on how the individual lives out the chosen destiny while on earth. In cases where an individual’s life is cut short and the chosen destiny not fulfilled, Yoruba have no doubt that the individual can reincarnate in order to achieve the fulfilment of the chosen destiny. This is not an automatic or general occurrence; it happens in cases of unfulfilled destiny and there are no grounds to doubt the possibility of this form of reincarnation, especially among persons who died violently or suffered untimely death.

This principle does not answer the concern whether life or destiny is determined by the nature of death or the length of life lived. What if the individual chose to live a short life or to die a violent death? According to *Babaláwo* Awogbile “destiny is private and unique; if one chose to live a short life, then he or she would have fulfilled his/her destiny. It is only when one does not achieve what one chose that destiny is not fulfilled.

He concludes by saying that *Ifá* is too sure to be wrong on such an issue.”<sup>27</sup>

The third basic principle is the belief in the existence of ancestors. Yoruba openly celebrate their belief in the co-existence of the ancestors with humans on earth. The

ancestors are referred to as the *ará òrun kinnkin*.<sup>28</sup> The existence of the teaching about the ancestors is another ground for the belief in reincarnation. It is taught and believed that ancestors can come back and live as a child in the family. They also believe that people are commonly reborn into the same family.<sup>29</sup> This happens so that the ancestors can solidify the good work he/she had begun during the first life. The belief that an ancestor appears in children is based on the observation that a good ancestor would have come back and live physically among humans, as various features of the dead ancestor is visible on new born children or in their character when they begin to grow up. This belief is only expressed in instances when a child resembles the ancestor that s/he is named after. The most significant requirement of this sense of reincarnation is the gender of the child; once the gender matches the gender of the ancestor, it is presumed that the ancestor has come back to live in the family.

According to *Babaláwo* Atunbi-Ifá, “the reincarnated ancestor announces his/her return with very strong striking semblance between the ancestor and the new child.”<sup>30</sup> The experiences of such semblance are fundamentally different from the cases of *àbíkú* or *àkúdàáyá* as discussed earlier. Ancestors do not assume the buried bodies, they incarnate in the newly born body, they are only accorded the regard and respect they had in their earlier lives, with the belief that they have returned to the family in the person of the child to continue the good work that they were known for in their life time.

The fourth basic principle arises when it is believed that God can do as he likes. According to *Babaláwo* Awogbile, God is entirely responsible for the experiences of reincarnation.’ This belief is described in one of his titles: ‘He who does whatever he likes’ (*a sè ’yó wu*), God can allow a soul to reincarnate in a body for reasons best known to him, even different

from an unfulfilled destiny.<sup>31</sup> This is why reincarnation is in most instances not taught just as a doctrine in Yoruba religion, neither is it a normal occurrence in the life cycle, it is a staggered experience that is not denied or dismissed as impossible.

### **Responses to objections to the idea of reincarnation**

Given the four basic principles for the belief in reincarnation, one can respond to the objections that have been raised against the belief in reincarnation and make a distinction between the beliefs the Yoruba people as against other religions. Some scholars have argued that the belief in reincarnation has not been substantiated with very cogent arguments, making them call for it to be discarded. To respond to the objection based on lack of cogent argument, one can look at the nature of individual or communal experiences. By the very nature of experience, it is not always all factually verifiable, just as much as it will be foolhardy for anyone to deny the reality of a claimed experience. The experience may not be reasonable or acceptable to the listener, but it cannot be denied of the owner of the experience that it never happened.

Reincarnation cannot be deleted from the realm of undeniable reality among the Yoruba. Just because reincarnation has no basis in other religions in the same way, especially the Arabian Desert religions of Christianity and Islam that have been introduced among the Yoruba in the 19<sup>th</sup> century does not make it a false belief. Although reincarnation may not have basis in some other religions, it does not change the experience of the people.

There have been objections on the basis of logic. Some scholars hold that reincarnation does not follow the logic of existence and life after death as taught in different religions.<sup>32</sup> To this objection, it is important to point out that the worldview of a people provides good ground for their belief. Among the Yoruba, it is believed that God can do

whatever he likes and the *orí* of an individual is also powerful enough to enforce the realization of the destiny that had been chosen from heaven; this can mean that even if an individual dies young, God or the individual *orí* can ensure reincarnation.

Although some scholars, like Egbe, strongly argued against reincarnation, they cannot deny the visible marks repeated on *àbíkuí*, or the very strong semblance found in *àkúdàáyá*. The best he was able to do is to attribute them to demonic psychic influences and not reincarnation. In addition to this, he said that the perceivable resemblance between a newly born child and an older member of the family (grand father/mother) is not a result of reincarnation; this he referred to the effect of genetics.<sup>33</sup> These do not reduce the strength of the worldview of the Yoruba on reincarnation. What stands out in the belief of the Yoruba is the fact that God does whatever he wishes and so may choose to follow an entirely different course and do what is not a logical consequence of previous actions.

There is the argument from psychosis. Some scholars have posited that reincarnation is a psychic hypothesis. Iroegbu argued that there are many rational ambiguities in the doctrine of reincarnation among Africans. He held that if reincarnation is a literal truism, then there would be a dualism of personal identity or stagnancy in population.<sup>34</sup> But this position would have been strong if, like in the Asian religions, Africans held that reincarnation was a normal sequence of existence on earth. Reincarnation for the Africans, and for the Yoruba in particular, is not a general principle or a normal step in the cycle of existence; it is a possible occurrence that has been experienced and justified by their belief in creation story and the authority of God.

There have been arguments from the other religions' point of view. Some Christian scholars have said that the belief in reincarnation is meant to distort the teaching about

after-life as taught in religions such as Christianity, Islam, etc. For them, reincarnation is aimed at challenging and possibly, uprooting the cream of the Christian tenets of judgement, after death, heaven, hell fire, and of God Almighty being in control of procreation and of the universe.<sup>35</sup> It is of essence to state that the religions and experiences of the Africans and the Yoruba had existed long before Christianity made its appearance on the continent of Africa; so reincarnation could not have been posited to uproot what came long after it. It is also important to clearly state that the belief of the Yoruba in judgement, after death, heaven, hell fire and God's control of procreation and the universe is not diametrically opposed to what Christianity and Islam teach; it is in fact for the most part the same. It is said, "when the person reaches After-Life, there he faces the final judgment. He has now to give an account of how he has used his earthly life, particularly with reference to his character."<sup>36</sup>

#### **Basic differences between the Yoruba belief and other beliefs in Reincarnation**

In other religions, reincarnation refers to the belief that an aspect of every human being (or all living beings) continues to exist after death.<sup>37</sup> This aspect continues in an endless cycle of rebirths linked to a notion of cleansing and refinement of the inner nature. Whereas, for the Yoruba, reincarnation is not a general principle; it occasionally happens in two circumstances, the first one happens in some cases of untimely death, so that an individual will fulfil his God given purpose/destiny in life. This is not a general principle; it is an occasional experience that is not predictable for the most part. And the second circumstance, wherein, reincarnation is used in a very loose sense; here, it is believed that an ancestor can reincarnate in a child if the gender is the same as that of an ancestor that died.

It is important to note that, this happens only when an ancestor has passed on before the birth of a new child; this can be an actual reincarnation or a mere desire expressed in the names given to a child. “It is believed that in spite of this reincarnation, the deceased continue to live in After-Life; those who are still in the world can have communion with them and they are there with all their ancestral qualities unimpaired.”<sup>38</sup>

It is in the above instance that the Yoruba give children names that reflect that ‘father or mother’ has returned to live in the family. Such names give clear evidence of familial or lineal rebirth. There is no simple guarantee that an ancestor or a grandfather/mother will reincarnate through the birth of a child even though “they believe that the first male child born after their father or grandfather’s death is a reincarnation of their grand-father or great grand-father. So, they will name the child *Babátúndé*. The first female born after the death of their grandmother will be called *Yétúndé* or *Ìyábò*”<sup>39</sup> (Ologundudu, 2008:172).

Reincarnation in other religions can be in two forms, first, it may be the return of certain aspect of the human person, which may be the soul or mind or consciousness or something transcendent, which is reborn in an interconnected cycle of existence.<sup>40</sup> And second, reincarnation can be a part of a cycle of teaching that takes place normally after every death. This is different in the belief of the Yoruba, where reincarnation in the real sense of the word is a real return of a person into the world. But there are no patterns to its occurrence. Even though the reality is not deniable, it happens at the instance of God’s authority, it does not exclude the individual from the normal cycle of birth, death, judgment and everlasting life either as a reward or punishment.

## **Conclusion**

This shows that there are still so much that is yet to be understood about human existence, as God is capable of acting outside the logic of humans and the teaching of religion. This essay points to experience, belief in destiny, ancestral interaction with the living and God's ability to do whatever He wishes as basis for belief in reincarnation among the Yoruba. It is evident that lived experiences cannot be denied, as experiences show that reincarnation has happened before, and nothing says that it cannot happen again.

Reincarnation issues are best responded to within particular cultures and religions, and not across cultures and religions. This is because experiences vary from culture to culture and religion to religion. It will be imposturous to deny other people's experiences as untrue even when they cannot prove it. One can totally disagree with the claimed experiences, but it is outside the realm of logic to deny other people's experiences as untrue.

Reincarnation, like every article of faith is not an issue for logical analysis; philosophy is to help logic know its limits and respect the realm outside reason, especially because humans are more than physical analysable objects of logic. Humans are both body (knowable to the senses and reason) and spirit (outside the realm of logic).

It is, therefore, important to respect people's experiences and report as they narrate their experiences. The phenomenological approach has exceedingly shown what the Yoruba believe about reincarnation and shed light on their position, situating this within the context of beliefs from other climes.

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